

### Geopolitical perspective of the Russian Federation and Brzezinski's readings of the Ukrainian crisis

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Indexing

Abstracting

## GEOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND BRZEZINSKI'S READINGS OF THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS

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**Abstract:** *From November 2013 to the present day the Ukrainian crisis generated the most severe conflict in Europe since the 1990s, while current skirmishes in the eastern part of the country and recent new developments have the potential to further tighten the crisis. Notwithstanding the internal elements of the ongoing crisis, this paper will be focused on the analysis of its external - geopolitical – dimension. By acquiring conceptual framework from Zbigniew Brzezinski's writings on geopolitics, this article will analyze the Ukrainian crisis in terms of strategic, economic and ideological interests of the Russian Federation.*

**Keywords:** *Ukraine; Russia; Brzezinski; Geopolitics*

### INTRODUCTION

A triumph and proclaimed ascendancy of liberal democracy and capitalism that was dominant in the Western intellectual and academic circles following the end of the Cold War was swiftly faced with the reality of non-resolved ethno-national and territorial disputes in Europe, which was primarily evident in conflicts in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. In the upcoming two decades different countries politically, economically, military, technologically and ideologically challenged the unipolar global order and the United States hegemony, with various battlefronts of different scale and nature emerging over the Europe. More recent crisis and conflict on the territory of Ukraine, triggered by the decision of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych to halt

process of deepening and determining relations with the European Union (EU) and subsequent Euromaidan protests in November 2013, represent the bloodiest conflict on the European soil since the Yugoslav wars in the last decade of XX century.

The course of events in Ukraine developed progressively – Russia annexed Crimea (strategically important peninsula on the northern coast of the Black Sea), which was an impetus for introducing sanctions by the EU, the US and other countries; conflict moved to eastern part of the country where the self-proclaimed Novorossiia was established; two accords were brokered by the Normandy contact group, however the peace was not achieved; while at the heart of argument of the ferocity of conflict are more than 10,000 casualties, including 3,000 civilians, as well as more than 1.7 million displaced people (Coman 2017). Moreover, due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and strained relations with Russia, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) deployed the new four battalions to the Eastern Europe in order to strengthen the so-called Eastern flank.

Going towards the sixth year of the crisis with the sporadic skirmishes in the Eastern Ukraine, three new potential threats is on the horizon that can further complicate already fragile state of affairs. The first one is the most recent crisis from November 2018 when Russian forces shot at and seized three Ukrainian vessels and injured six people. This incident directly reflects Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, since the Ukrainian vessels were planning to go through the Kerch Strait that was controlled by Ukraine – on the side of Crimea – and Russia – on the side of Taman Peninsula – before the beginning of conflict. As a result Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko declared 30 days of martial law in border areas.

Secondly, the incumbent Ukrainian President in 2017 announced the intention to hold a referendum on Ukrainian membership to NATO (DuVall 2018). Moreover, in June 2017 Verkhovna Rada adopted a bill that recognizes NATO integration as a foreign policy priority (Alexe 2018). More recently, Poroshenko informed the public on 10 March 2018 via his official Facebook profile that he sent a letter to NATO Secretary General, referring to Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty, where he “officially [set out] Ukraine's aspirations to become a member of the Alliance”, thus adding that Kyiv is seeking a Membership Action Plan (MAP) (Radio Free Europe 2018). This Ukrainian pursuit of the MAP evokes the context and discussion before and during the Bucharest summit in 2008, when NATO was considering to offers the MAP to Ukraine and Georgia, which had a strong backing from the US and President Bush. Thus, a new question comes to the surface – will Ukrainian integration processes again fuel the internal turmoil in society and generate additional tensions in the international community. The third threat comes from religious domain and given signals that Constantinople Patriarchy will recognize the Ukrainian Orthodox Church as independent. Ongoing crisis in Ukraine has internal and external dimensions – former has roots in historical trends, issue of ethnic groups and minorities, as well as in overarching political and socio-economic problems.

On the other hand, particularly important in the analysis of the Ukrainian crisis are impacts of external factors that are predominantly geopolitical in nature. Thus, the Ukrainian strategic geographic position, energy resources, significance as a transit country for energy, along with its importance for relations between Russia and the West, are implying that the crisis contains a geopolitical logic that has to be thoroughly addressed. Further, I would argue that disclosing the geopolitical paradigm of the Ukrainian crisis in the perspective of Russian interests represents a necessary instrument in order to comprehend core rationale and motives behind it. Therefore, this article will focus and elaborate on the Kremlin's geopolitical interests, which will be segmented and analyzed in terms of strategic, economic and ideological interests.

### *Brzezinski's geopolitical lenses in terms of Eurasia and Ukraine*

In order to develop and elaborate on the argument that the Ukrainian crisis has inner geopolitical element, it is necessary to provide a conceptual working definition of geopolitics. The mere term geopolitics coined Swedish legal jurist Radolf Kjellen in 1899 and it represents a multidisciplinary method of observing foreign policy, including an observation of political geography, international relations, international law, etc. (Marklund 2014). In developing a conceptual framework for grasping the external dimension of the Ukrainian crisis I will briefly, due to the envisaged scope of the paper, build upon the writings of Zbigniew Brzezinski, former National Security Advisor to the US President and a realist scholar particularly interested in geopolitics. Brzezinski's vision and understanding of the geopolitics was predominantly organized in terms of foreign policy instrumentalization. His arguments were developed on the basis of Mackinder's Heartland theory, however within the perspective of the US national and geopolitical interests. Brzezinski was not alone in leaning severely on Mackinder's paradigms (Sabet 2015). Even Henry Kissinger, a prominent figure of US foreign policy in the Cold War era and former Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, emphasized the importance of Russia in terms of its position astride the Mackinder's geopolitical Heartland (Sempa 2009). Brzezinski revived Mackinder's Heartland theory in context of the Cold War by arguing that Eurasia represents a pivotal area for the future of international politics and geopolitical aspirations of global powers (Knutsen 2014). He developed an argument that "whoever controls Eurasia dominates the globe", and through the vision of US foreign policy warned "if the Soviet Union captures the peripheries of this landmass, it would not only win control of vast human, economic and military resources but also gain access to the geostrategic approaches to the Western Hemisphere – the Atlantic and the Pacific" (Brzezinski 1998, 111).

The bedrock of US strategic and ideological imperative to sustain influence in Eurasia in Brzezinski's writings is in accordance with the imperative to preserve leading global geopolitical position.

He recognized (1998, 30) the Eurasia as “the chief geopolitical prize” for America, given that its “global primacy is directly dependent on how long and how effectively its preponderance on the Eurasian continent is sustained.” Therefore, Eurasia is placed at the centrum of American geopolitical strategic interests, since Brzezinski believed that global affairs were always dominated by the relations within this particular region. Thus, he emphasized that the US fundamental geopolitical interest is to prevent the emerging of any more influential or even dominant power in Eurasia. Brzezinski was particularly interested in the geopolitical significance of Ukraine that derives from its vital geostrategic point between Europe and Asia (Balmaceda 2004). Thus, he emphasized that Ukraine represents a substantial actor for ensuring the ascendancy within the Eurasian region. Furthermore, Brzezinski recognized the Ukrainian important role in the geopolitical game on the ‘Eurasian chessboard’ since he argued that Russia without Ukraine ceases to be ‘Eurasian empire’ and would have become a predominantly Asian imperial state (Rifenbary 2014). In addition, Brzezinski (1998, 46) stated that if Russia restores control over Ukraine, with its around 45 million people, major resources and access to the Black Sea, then “Russia automatically again regains the wherewithal to become a powerful imperial state, spanning Europe and Asia.” Therefore, without Ukraine, Russia's strategic geopolitical objectives and a tendency for the regional hegemony, based on the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) or the Eurasia platform, are not likely to be achieved (Balmaceda 2004). In terms of geopolitical realm Brzezinski, on the grounds of Mackinder's theory, distinctly indicated the resounding importance of Ukraine for the clash of great powers' interests in Eurasia, which was genuinely confirmed with their involvement and the intensity of the crisis. Hence, in order to understand the substance of this subject matter, it is important to determine and present geopolitical incentives of external actor that had the most prominent impact on the Ukrainian crisis.

### *Russian geopolitical perspective and interests*

The Kremlin's geopolitical motives regarding Ukraine are broad, complex, inter-connected and historically rooted. With the decision to take over Crimea, the Kremlin has genuinely progressed from soft to hard power with the aim to secure its geopolitical objectives in the naval bases in Sevastopol and surroundings (Gotz 2015). Hence, I would argue that Russia's first direct geopolitical move related to the Ukrainian crisis reflected its principal strategic interest. The annexation of Crimea, along with the overarching impact in Abkhazia, enabled Russian effective control over the substantial part of the Black Sea, particularly the Kerch Strait and the Sea of Azov, which was always considered as a strategically vital area (Chossudovsky 2014). The broader community became aware of the importance of this area due to the recent naval crisis from November 2018, which has a severe potential for escalation of conflict. In addition, one

has to keep in mind that Russia obtained roughly 36,000 miles of territory around Crimea, establishing the maritime borders with Romania and Turkey (Biersack and O’Lear 2014).



Figure 1. Crimean geostrategic position

It has to be particularly acknowledged that one of the core Russia’s interest related to the annexation of Crimea was to protect the most important naval assets – the Black Sea Fleet, based outside of Sevastopol and with a smaller facility in Novorossiisk, Russia (Tsygankov 2015). Ukraine and Russia formally divided, after years of negotiations, the Soviet Black Sea fleet by signing a Treaty in 1997, with which the Russian Black Sea Fleet obtained basing rights in Crimea until 2017 (Charap and Darden 2014). Regulation of the Black Sea Fleet was perceived as a major incentive for the bilateral tensions between Russia and Ukraine in that period. Furthermore, in 2010 two states signed the Kharkiv Accords in order to extend the Russian Black Sea Fleet presence in Crimea until 2042 (Sharples and Judge 2014). The Kharkiv Accords defined that Russia will be paying decreased rent to Ukraine for the Black Sea Fleet’s bases in return for the discount on natural gas consumption. With that arrangement, Ukraine’s political and economic dependency on Russian energy resources was additionally strengthened (Sherr 2010).

However, it has to be underlined that the Black Sea Fleet's significance, as a specific geopolitical interest of Russia, is not within its prominent military power. Namely, the Fleet is composed of 40 active duty combat ships a number of seaworthy vessels, which are supplemented by a variety of sea and land units around the Crimean peninsula (Gorenburg 2014). Rather, it is valuable because it secures access to the Black Sea, along with the historical (since the late XVIII century) and regional importance of its presence. Yet, Russia has stated that it will increase its naval military units in Crimea with a new ship and submarine construction, since it does not have obligations under the treaties that have regulated this issue before, which limited the number of troops and military hardware in the peninsula in the past (Socor 2014).

Other important benefits that Russia acquired from the annexation of Crimea and its maritime territory are energy supplies that are beneath the Black Sea (Biersack and O'Lear 2014). Namely, some experts are claiming that Russia gained much of Ukrainian oil and gas reserves that are located in the Black Sea (Stulberg 2015). Also, it has been indicated that in the Black Sea there are considerably large resources of hydrocarbon, and the Ukrainian company responsible for the Black Sea's energy potentials, Chornomornaftogaz, was nationalized by the Crimean separatists swiftly after the annexation (Biersack and O'Lear 2014). Furthermore, after the referendum in Crimea and its integration into Russia, Chornomornaftogaz began to function under the auspices of the Russian Gazprom (Socor 2014). Because of the seizure of military facilities and oil and gas potentials, officials in Kiev estimated that Ukraine will have, in near future, a significant financial loss amounting to 300 billion dollars, including their assessment of around 2.3 million tons of oil equivalent (Daly 2014).

In the context of strategic interest, one should not forget Moscow's interest regarding the defense area, i.e. aerospace and defense industry of Ukraine. Even though share of Ukrainian exports in Russia's total military imports are between 2 and 4%, the Russian defense industry would suffer a great shortage of substantial components without Ukrainian products (Larrabee *et al.* 2015). In the period from 2009 to 2013 Russia was the third-largest consumer of products of the Ukrainian defense industry, and some parts and services Russia is importing only from Ukraine. For instance, particular segments of the Russian military is heavily dependent on products from Ukraine – helicopter engines (Motor Sich in the southeastern Ukrainian city of Zaporizhia); transport planes (Antonov plant in Kiev); more than half of the components of Russia's ground-based intercontinental ballistic missile force come from Ukraine; a Ukrainian state-owned aerospace manufacturer Yuzhmash designs, manufactures and services rockets and missiles, which is also of pivotal importance for Russia (McLees and Rumer 2014). Furthermore, it is estimated that around 30% of Ukraine's defense-related products in Russia could not be replaced by its domestic production (Larrabee *et al.* 2015). Hence, for Moscow that would mean additional investments in the defense sector, which would further impact already fragile economic situation.



On the other hand, bilateral relations of Ukraine and Russia in terms of economy are still under the solid influence of their common Soviet history since the two countries have developed close ties over the years with a common market of goods (Charap and Darden 2014). One can argue that the Kremlin strongly advocated halting the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement (AA), since it would have multiple negative effects on the Russian market, due to the fact that many Russian goods are not in accordance with the EU safety conditions and technical requirements (Götz 2015).

More important segment of Russia's economic interest in Ukraine is related to the energy sector and it is of profound geopolitical importance. Namely, Ukraine is the key transit country for transport of natural gas to Europe from Russia and Central Asia, while around 80% of Europe's gas imports from Russia go through Ukrainian pipelines (Cohen and Graham 2009). From those arrangements, Gazprom acquires two-thirds of its profit from gas that goes through this energy corridor. It has to be understood that Ukraine is also heavily double-dependent on Russia's energy – a consumption of natural gas from the Russian producers, as well as earning most of its foreign income from providing the services for the unobstructed transit of energy (Braithwaite 2014). In the context of Russian energy policy, Gazprom was halting gas supplies several times over the last years (winters of 2005-2006, 2007-2008 and 2008-2009), which affected not just Ukrainian, but also energy policy of countries of Western Europe.

Exploitation of energy dependence is widely recognized as one of Russia's foreign policy instruments, thus energy resources are used to accomplish not only economic objectives, but security and political ones as well. Energy policy allows Russia to exercise power beyond its borders and to influence the policies of other countries that are dependent on its supplies. Hence, the Kremlin has the possibility to coerce countries that hinder its foreign policy objectives – for instance, in 2002 Russia cut oil deliveries to Lithuania and Latvia after two countries prevented Moscow from purchasing major energy holdings (Weitz 2014). The energy potential of Russia was also an indispensable part of relations with Ukraine, which, for example, could be viewed in a deal from 2010 to extend the Russian Black Sea Fleet on Ukrainian territory for 25 more years, while in return it would obtain the reduction of gas prices by 30%.





Figure 2. Ukrainian energy significance

A permanent intention of the Kremlin was to have control of the pipelines that go through Ukraine. Therefore, Russia put Ukrainian authorities under pressure to accept the joint ownership of Naftogaz, Ukrainian state-controlled gas company. Konstantin Kosachyev, Chairman of the International Affairs Committee of the Russian Parliament, summarized this issue plainly: "The idea was for Ukraine and Russia to become a single transit space between Europe and China, between European and Asian markets" (Wegren 2013). Thus, one has to comprehend that Ukraine, as an energy transit country, is of paramount geopolitical importance for Russia - its economy and businesses, as well as in terms of foreign policy instrumentalization.

When it comes to the ideological component, one element has been often used for purposes of building public approval regarding geopolitical activities concerning Ukraine. Namely, the monumental part of Russian tradition and history is located in the capital of Ukraine - the cradle of the Russian civilization is the medieval state of the Kievan Rus, a federation of Slavic principalities on the soil of today's Ukraine (Gotz 2015).

Also, it represents a sacred place for many Russians since the origins of the Russian Orthodox Church derive from the medieval Kievan Rus, where Christianity was accepted in 988, which became the cradle and foundation of today's modern nation-state. Furthermore, after the Ukrainian independence, Russia lost a number of sites with a great historical value, including the first Orthodox monastery and graves of legendary medieval knights. President Putin underlined the Russian sentiment for Ukraine, particularly for Crimea, while addressing the Federal Chamber after the annexation of Crimea by saying: "Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptized. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus" (Address by President of the Russian Federation 2014).

In addition, Russian ideological geopolitical perspective is on line with the policy of neo-Euroasianism, which conceptual foundation is that Russia derives its geopolitical strength from the position between Europe and Eastern Asia (similar with mentioned Brzezinski's reasoning) (Morozova 2009). Therewith, the Russia's fundamental ideological geopolitical objective related to Ukraine is twofold – to block it from accession to NATO and to place it in the centrum of its Euroasianism policy (Trenin 2014).

Referring to the first objective, Russian national interests concerning regional objectives are to ensure its security, as well as preponderance and control over the countries of the former Soviet bloc. In that particular geopolitical perspective, the main focus was always on Ukraine and the direction of its foreign policy. Here ideology is being employed as an instrument for ensuring strategic aims and advantages, which is certainly not a precedent in the history of international conduct. Moscow emphasized plainly on numerous occasions that the NATO enlargement, which could specifically be observed as both strategic and ideological interest, represents a security threat for Russia, therefore an essential geopolitical interest of Russia is to ensure its security by eradicating the perspectives of the NATO enlargement to Ukraine. However, Ukraine is not an isolated example in this context, due to the official standpoint that NATO expansion to the countries of Eastern Europe is part of a project to isolate Russia and constrain its strategic interests. Moreover, the Kremlin is constantly repeating that in the post-Cold war period it was promised to Russia that NATO would not extend to the countries that are traditionally perceived as a part of Russian sphere of interest (Braithwaite 2014). Therefore, the Kremlin's firm opposition to the NATO enlargement to Ukraine is important in two aspects. Primarily because possible Ukrainian accession to NATO could not be observed as an individual issue, since for Russia it would mean a significant loss of influence in the whole ex-Soviet area and a profound geopolitical defeat.

Secondly, with that firm opposition the Kremlin is sending a message that Russia is still a significant global subject that is able to preserve its regional dominance, and, more importantly, to protect its strategic security interests when they are challenged. An important instrument of the policy of neo-Euroasianism is the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which is established with an aim to gather and integrate post-Soviet states around Russia, and subsequently to enhance Russian bargaining power vis-à-vis Europe and the rest of the world in political and economic terms (Ditrych 2014). The EEU, which operates through supranational and intergovernmental institutions, is perceived as an element of confronting Brussels in normative and institutional terms within the so-called "shared neighborhood" (Popescu 2014). With the functional and solid EEU, Russia has shifted its policy from relying on "soft" power, military strength, energy conditionality, towards the establishment of an institutional regime for promoting its interest in the post-Soviet space. Brussels's discomfort with the progressive development of the EEU could be noted in the statement, dated just two days after signing of the Treaty aimed at establishment of the EEU, made by the European Union's (EU) commissioner for enlargement Stefan Füle: "If we are serious about transforming the countries in Eastern Europe, we have to use the most important tool for transformation: the enlargement" (Fraczek 2014).

Russian authorities are trying to take advantage of the EU's policies that are placing integration in the context of the Association Agreement, DCFTA, Visa Facilitation Agreements, but not membership. Economic integration of the post-Soviet region was usually perceived as the Russian traditional power politics play for the neighboring states - colored by the crude power, without institutional strength, and largely permeated with a discourse that belongs to the past. However, the EEU has a more focused institutional structure than any other previous instrumental attempts of gathering the ex-Soviet countries. Thus, the EEU operates as a rule-based organization, aligned with the modern international postulates, as well as with the rules and principles of the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Popescu 2014).

In order to regain its influence and secure interests in the post-Soviet sphere, the Kremlin introduced the policy which should establish an economic integration based on a regulated institutional regime (Ditrych 2014). Strengthening and fostering relations between the countries of the ex-Soviet regime is not any more emphasized by the emotional discourses about common history and religion, but by the pure economic pragmatism. Therefore, Russian authorities underline the specific economic benefits coming from the closer relation with the EEU, which is additionally supported by the solid institutional organism.

The intent of establishment of the operative EEU was to challenge the EU normatively and to create a unique alternative for the Brussels's set-up in the post-Soviet sphere. This is especially notable in the case of Ukraine, where Russia is openly advocating the EEU as an alternative to the EU integration process (Popescu 2014).

With that, the EU and the EEU are involved in direct geopolitical competition over Ukraine. With the pro-Russian political elite in power in Ukraine, Putin had an open geopolitical context to tighten and intensify the relations among countries of the CIS, i.e. to introduce and develop the idea of establishing the EEU (Tsygankov 2015). Indirectly, Russia's pushing for Ukraine to become a part of the EEU represented the important incentive for triggering the Ukrainian conflicts later on. In 2011, Russia officially invited Ukraine to become a member of the ECU, which represented an institutional arrangement towards establishing the EEU (MacFarlane and Menon 2014). Ukraine was of crucial importance for the relevance of the EEU, therefore Russia was constantly stressing the economic benefits of joining the organization, particularly in terms of increasing trade (Tsygankov 2015). It is particularly important to note that with an official invitation to join the ECU, Ukraine also received promises regarding another significant discount on gas prices (Kropatcheva 2011). Nevertheless, Yanukovich rejected the offer to join the ECU, but also, what is more important for Moscow's national interests, refused to sell the controlling shares of Ukraine's national oil and gas company, Naftogaz, to the Russian-controlled global energy company Gazprom (Tsygankov 2015).

However, the Kremlin understood profoundly the geopolitical context and used properly the EU's indecisiveness to act accordingly. Primarily, the Russian authorities offered Ukraine another additional discount in energy prices, along with 15 billion dollars as a financial aid (McElroy 2013). Yanukovich's response was in November 2013 at the EU summit in Vilnius, where he stated that Ukraine postpones the AA with the EU (Traynor and Grytsenko 2013). That particular decision triggered Euromaidan protests that lead to further conflicts on the territory of Ukraine. Due to its size and geopolitical significance, the accession of Ukraine to the EEU would bolster this relatively new institutional setting in economic, geographic and political terms.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to portray complexity of the crisis that has shaken not just Ukraine, rather entire Europe and beyond. The core of that ramification could be located in the involvement of external powers that sparked already delicate ethno-national image of Ukraine. Given that states' foreign strategies and actions are defined by its particular interests in specific historical context, in order to understand the essence of the Ukrainian crisis it is necessary to elaborate on the concrete motives of external actor involved. Therefore, this article attempted to develop the argument that Ukraine is geopolitically attractive in strategic, economic and ideological domain, as well as to present geopolitical motives of Russia. In addition, the mere importance of Ukraine, due its strategic geographic position, energy resources and corridors, implies that geopolitics lies at the heart of the most severe crisis since the last decade of the XX century.

Brzezinski throws light on the geopolitical significance of Ukraine in the context of great powers' tendency to secure dominance in Eurasia. Hence, he assigned Ukraine a pivotal figure on the "Eurasian chessboard" due to its vital geostrategic position, major resources, access to the Black Sea and importance for Russian strategic interests.

Therefore, in terms of realist perspective and geopolitical thoughts, Brzezinski's writings still represent a valuable asset in the analysis of current crisis in Ukraine. At the end, I would argue that contemporary global challenges and conflicts require a comprehensive analytical geopolitical approach, hence the Ukrainian crisis represents a profound argument that geopolitical paradigm, discourse and practices still have a major role in contemporary global politics.



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